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THE WAR OF IDEAS:
AN ABANDONED FRONT IN THE GLOBAL WAR ON
TERROR

by

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Abstract

This paper, which was prepared using a historical research methodology, argues that the U.S. is losing the “war of ideas,” and it provides recommendations that can support a comeback. The importance of the U.S. Department of State in the global war on terror is briefly introduced; as the lead agency for strategic communications in the war of ideas, it is distinguished from the U.S. Department of Defense, which leads the physical struggle. To develop a sense of urgency in resolving the State Department’s subsequently outlined problems, the argument is made that the ideological struggle is strategic in nature, as it can target the underlying source of terrorism. Key statements made by U.S. spokespeople are reviewed to identify the State Department’s communications strategy. Polling data is then reviewed to demonstrate the Department’s performance. The lackluster track record in the war of ideas is linked to three problem areas: resources, organization, and strategy. Each problem area has contributed to a precariously weak wartime posture. Recommendations that can help resolve these issues include: a study to better determine the enemy’s propaganda expenditures; an approximate three-fold increase in resources (funding and personnel) for State’s public diplomacy activities; an organizational architecture that provides unity of command, centralized control, decentralized execution, interagency coordination, and implicit communications across the chain of command; and the development of a new communications strategy that aims more directly at the underlying source or cause of

terrorism.

Introduction

"On the battle of ideas, we have unilaterally disarmed," said Marc Ginsberg, a former ambassador to Morocco.¹ "We have abandoned the playing field to the [Islamist] radicals and we have failed to empower our allies in the region with the tools they need to confront the radicals by themselves."²

It is often said that the global war on terror is all about *taking the fight to the enemy*. This frames it as a physical struggle – the domain of the U.S. Department of Defense. Yet, is the pen not mightier than the sword? Is the war on terror not as much an ideological struggle as a physical one, aimed at Islamic terrorism's underlying source (more on this source later)?

The *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism* hints at physical eradication, with the intent "to stop terrorist attacks against the United States, its citizens, its interests, and our friends and allies around the world and ultimately, to create an international environment inhospitable to terrorists and all those who support them."³ A scan of headline news or a look at presidential budgets since 9/11 would further underscore the level of priority given to the military solution. But in the grand scheme of things the military is best suited for stopping the *symptoms*: terrorists and their support networks. The nature of the physical struggle is tactical. 'Breaking things and killing people' does little to achieve the strategic effect of negating terrorism's underlying cause. As Harlan Ullman, senior associate at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, put it: "You just can't kill everybody. You have to deal with the intellectual...arguments that empower people like Ossama bin Laden."⁴

Overview

America is losing the war of ideas because it has not dedicated the resources, the organization, nor the strategy needed to fight effectively. To make this argument, a brief background of the ideological struggle, as led by the U.S. Department of State, will be presented. This will be followed by a look at the State Department's communications strategy. Next, the performance metric tied to that strategy will be reviewed, showing poor results. Finally, the key problem areas contributing to the State Department's weak performance will be identified, followed by recommendations that can help resolve these issues.

Background

Immediately following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, there was no shortage of buzz and punditry about the notion that an unwelcome clash of ideologies had arrived on American shores, and that the global war on terror would indeed be as much a war of ideas as it would be one of lethal weapons. Within days of the attack, Secretary of State Colin Powell answered a longstanding invitation to appear on Al-Jazeera, the Arab satellite news channel.⁵ Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice followed Secretary Powell's lead, conducting interviews with Al-Jazeera.⁶ The State Department compiled evidence linking Al Qaeda and the 9/11 attack into a brochure, "The Network of Terrorism."⁷ And on 2 October 2001 veteran advertising executive Charlotte Beers was sworn in to head up the State Department's public diplomacy effort (the Department defines public diplomacy as "government-sponsored programs intended to inform or influence public opinion in other countries"), which was heralded in with much fanfare as the strategic communications centerpiece for the war of ideas.⁸ Targeting predominantly Muslim countries, the public diplomacy

campaign included a new web site and a series of ads about Muslim life in America to emphasize the *Shared Values* (the name of the campaign) between Americans and Muslims; and, new Arabic, Farsi, Dari, and Pashto-language radio stations were launched, with plans developed for an Arabic-language television network.⁹ All of this begs to question: what was the communications strategy?

Strategy

Unfortunately, no strategic communications plan exists from which a strategy could be drawn. The Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Strategic Communication, published in September 2004, highlights this shortfall: "...the current national security strategy (October 2002) says nothing about the power of information...We now have national strategies for securing cyberspace, protecting national infrastructures, military strategy, and others, yet a national strategy for the employment of strategic communication does not exist."¹⁰

To divine the State Department's communications strategy, consider the following statements aimed at the Muslim world:

*Let me say to my friends in the Arab world and all other people how much we admire them and let them know that this conflict, this campaign we are about to begin is not directed against Arabs or anyone of the Islamic faith; it's against terrorism.*¹¹

—Colin Powell, interview with Al-Jazeera, 17 September 2001

*We have pursued economic development with close partners in the region. We just signed a free trade agreement with Jordan that we believe will bring jobs and opportunity to the population of Jordan. We have a healthy economic dialogue with Egypt. We think that our policies are policies that are healthy for the region. And as so, we look forward to talking more about the policies. This is not just a matter of perception; it is a matter of policies that we think are healthy for the region.*¹²

—Condoleeza Rice, interview with Al-Jazeera 16 October 2001

And from various Muslim-American spokespeople for the State Department's Shared Values campaign:

*Religious freedom here is something very important, and no one ever bothers us.*¹³

*My name is Farooq Muhammad. I'm a paramedic for the fire department of New York. I never got disrespected because I'm a Muslim.*¹⁴

*It's nice to know that Americans are willing to understand more about Islam, and there is an opportunity for mutual understanding.*¹⁵

*I was totally embraced by the people here, my professors, everybody told me, 'Well, we're all immigrants here. We're all from different places, and we all meld together.'*¹⁶

— U.S. spokespeople, *Shared Values* advertising campaign, circa 2002-03

According to the General Accountability Office, the central premise of all this has been to “demonstrate that the United States is an open society and not at war with Islam, and that Americans and Muslims share certain values and beliefs.”¹⁷ Essentially, it is a strategy to convince the Muslim world not to hate America – a popularity contest of sorts.

How did improving American popularity among Muslims become the State Department's strategy for the war of ideas? It likely evolved from reasonable, obvious assessments like "the perceptions of foreign publics have domestic consequences," from Congressman Henry Hyde, and "We have to do a better job of telling our story," from President Bush, among countless others.¹⁸ As Beers told a 2003 Congressional hearing, “We are talking about millions of ordinary people, a huge number of whom have gravely distorted, but carefully cultivated images of us – images so negative, so weird, so hostile that I can assure you a young generation of terrorists is being created. The gap between who we are and how we wish to be seen, and how we are in fact seen, is frighteningly wide.”¹⁹ Thus, the simple conclusion: if terrorist attacks like those of 9/11 were the

result of Muslim misperceptions conducive to such profound hatred of America, then the logical communications strategy for the war of ideas would be to negate Muslim anti-Americanism. Has it worked?

Results

Given the State Department's communications strategy, it stands to reason that a primary measure of performance would be favorability ratings of the U.S. among Muslims throughout the world. But first consider some anecdotal evidence from a recent presidential visit to Canada. As a recent editorial in the *Washington Post* (26 February 2005) pointed out, "When President Bush visited Canada shortly after his reelection, thousands protested on the streets of Ottawa. In mocking reference to the fate of Saddam Hussein a year earlier, a statue-sized effigy of the president was hoisted to a rostrum above the crowd and then pulled down to loud cheers. That such things should occur in the capital of a friendly neighbor, echoing similar demonstration in capitals around the world, reveals how deep-seated anti-Americanism has come to be."²⁰ And according to a BBC World Service survey of 21 countries conducted after President Bush's reelection, "on average across all countries, 58% of people – and 16 out of 21 countries polled – said they believed Mr. Bush's re-election to the White House made the world more dangerous," with only three countries – India, Poland, and the Philippines believing the world is now safer.²¹ It is also likely that such feelings become generalized toward the American people who reelected President Bush.

As for the Muslim world, polling data exists which provides a greater degree of fidelity regarding how the State Department is faring in the war of ideas. As a 2004 Brookings Institution Analysis Paper puts it: "While U.S. power is at its greatest historic heights, global esteem for the United States is at its depths. Polling has found anti-American sentiment to be particularly strong in Muslim countries and communities

across the world, while the continuing violence in the Middle East has only further hardened attitudes.”²² The Brookings Institution cites Pew polling data, warning that “since the spring of 2002, there has been a precipitous decline in the favorability towards the United States within the Islamic world – for example a drop from 61 percent to 15 percent in Indonesia and from 25 percent to 1 percent in Jordan.”²³ It also cites Zogby polling data, showing that American favorability ratings in Saudi Arabia went from an already low 12 percent down to 3 percent.²⁴ If such numbers are any indicator of success – and there is no shortage of policy makers and analysts who believe they are – then the U.S. appears to be losing the war of ideas. Why?

Problems

"How can a man in a cave out-communicate the world's leading communications society?" asked Richard C. Holbrooke, former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations.²⁵ Echoing the 9/11 Commission Report, the Defense Science Board said that the U.S. strategic communications effort is in crisis, failing to challenge a pervasive environment of hostility toward the United States across the Muslim world.²⁶ And according to Robert Satloff, Executive Director of The Washington Institute, "...the battle of ideas suffers from the weakest bureaucratic champions, the least resources, and the fewest headlines."²⁷ There is no shortage of expert analyses that attempt to identify what the problems are. Most of them cite resource and organizational shortfalls as the main problems; and, by the author's count, only one hinted that the strategy itself might be a problem.

Resource Problems

Certainly, money is an important factor in mass communications. The enemy knows it. Amir Taheri, a Middle East analyst and CNN commentator, estimates the Islamist propaganda machine's bill to be "about \$100 billion during the last two decades alone, which makes it the largest propaganda machine in history, even larger than the communist propaganda machine during the Soviet era."²⁸ Meanwhile, U.S. public diplomacy hit the skids following the Cold War, and by 9/11 it showed. As Beers, who resigned in 2003 from her position as Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, candidly said during a March 2004 interview with National Public Radio,

“It was simply shocking how little equipment we had...and there was a complete dearth of training.”²⁹ Newton Minow, Annenberg Professor of Communications, Law and Policy at Northwestern University and former chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, elaborates: “Many of the resources that had once been given to public diplomacy – to explaining ourselves and our values to the world – were eliminated. In the Middle East particularly, American broadcasting is not even a whisper. An Arab-language radio service is operated by the Voice of America, but its budget is tiny and its audience tinier – only about 1 to 2 percent of Arabs ever listen to it. Among those under the age of 30 – 60 percent of the population in the region – virtually no one listens.”³⁰

With such a thin bottom line, geographic prioritization of resources becomes all the more important. Yet, of the \$600 million spent annually on public diplomacy, only about \$150 million was spent in Muslim-majority countries, according to a 2003 report from the Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy for the Arab and Muslim World.³¹ From this figure, subtract funding earmarked for exchange programs, the salaries of public affairs officers, foreign service nationals, and embassy employees involved in public diplomacy. What does this leave for actual public diplomacy outreach programs? A depressingly small \$25 million, the Advisory Group laments, enabling very little public diplomacy work to be carried on outside national capitals in the Muslim world.³² As for human resources, the Advisory Group cites shortfalls in training, knowledge and fluency. In language skills, for example, “Only 54 State Department employees have tested at the fully professional or bilingual level of competence in Arabic. Of these, some were tested years ago and may no longer maintain the tested level of competence. Others are serving outside the Arab world. Only a handful can hold their own on television. The situation

with other languages common in the Muslim world is even worse.”³³

Compare this dearth of resources to what the military is given, and a strategic imbalance becomes apparent regarding how the U.S. is equipped to execute the *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism*. According to a September 2004 report from the Defense Science Board Task Force on Strategic Communication, “annual spending for State Department information programs and U.S. international broadcasting [led by an independent federal entity known as the Broadcasting Board of Governors] is approximately \$1.2 billion – one-quarter of 1 percent of the military budget.”³⁴ Or, as Minow quantifies it: “The cost of putting Radio Free Afghanistan on the air and underwriting its annual budget, for example, is less than even one Comanche helicopter. We have many hundreds of helicopters which we need to destroy tyranny, but they are insufficient to secure freedom. In an asymmetric war, we must also fight on the idea front.”³⁵

From the author’s personal experience in managing a recruitment advertising program for the Department of Defense, the \$15 million used to fund the State Department’s *Shared Values* ad campaign was grossly inadequate. With a comparable budget of about \$18 million, this recruit advertising campaign reached an estimated 73 million Americans approximately 2.5 times over the course of one year. *Shared Values* reportedly reached an estimated 288 million people from its target audience of about 1 billion Muslims across the globe; and the campaign only lasted about three months.³⁶ Though the author was unable to uncover data on how many times the ads reached these people, it is unlikely, given the campaign’s limited duration and budget, that the frequency of viewership would have been much higher than two times. This is hardly

enough to resolve the problem of anti-Americanism among Muslims.

From a post-Cold War perspective, staff and funding resources for public diplomacy have eroded by over 30 percent since 1989, and today more than 60 percent of the Department's overseas missions have only one public diplomacy officer.³⁷ "In this time of peril," the Advisory Group warns, "public diplomacy is absurdly and dangerously under-funded, and simply restoring it to its Cold War status is not enough."³⁸

Organizational Problems

For U.S. strategic communications to be effective, it has to be consistent. If different heads of state are not communicating consistent strategic themes, or they contradict each other, the effort is wasted. So, it is essential to have centralized command and control at the national/strategic level – a single office with a single “commander” empowered to unify the strategic communications planning, direction, execution, and evaluation activities of multiple government agencies below, laterally, and – in the case of presidential communications – above. Unfortunately, there is no such unity of command. According to a General Accounting Office report on U.S. public diplomacy in 2003: “After September 11, State acknowledged the lack of, and the need for, a comprehensive strategy that integrates all of its diverse public diplomacy activities...Furthermore, an interagency public diplomacy strategy has not been completed that would help State and other federal agencies convey consistent messages and achieve mutually reinforcing benefits overseas.”³⁹ It hasn't helped that the Office of the Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs has been hamstrung by short appointments and long vacancies (it was vacant or filled in an acting capacity for two years during President Bush's 2000-2004 term).⁴⁰ This is not to say that attempts to

unify strategic communications under one office haven't been made. They have, but they were unsuccessful. First, in June 2002, the White House established an Office of Global Communications to coordinate "strategic communications with global audiences" and advise "on the strategic direction and themes that United States government agencies use to reach foreign audiences."⁴¹ Yet, "Despite sweeping authority calling for the OGC to develop strategies for developing messages, assess methods and strategies, coordinate temporary teams of communicators, and encourage state-of-the art media and technology, the OGC evolved into a second tier organization devoted principally to tactical public affairs coordination. The OGC does not engage in strategic direction, coordination, and evaluation."⁴² A second entity, the Strategic Communication Policy Coordinating Committee, was established in September 2002 by National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice "at the direction of the President and in consultation with the Vice President and the Secretaries of State, Treasury, and Defense."⁴³ It was intended to "coordinate interagency activities, to ensure that all agencies work together and with the White House to develop and disseminate the President's messages across the globe." According to the Defense Science Board, its authority included "interagency support for international broadcasting, foreign information programs, and public diplomacy...[and] development of strategic communications capabilities throughout the government."⁴⁴ Co-chaired by the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, "the PCC met several times with marginal impact. It has not met for more than a year."⁴⁵ The Defense Science Board concluded that the OGC and the NSC's Strategic Communication PCC have overlapping authorities, and that both have been "ineffectual in carrying out intended responsibilities relating to strategic communication planning, coordination, and

evaluation.”⁴⁶

Strategy Problems

The most overlooked problem is the State Department’s communications strategy. From analyses by the Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy for the Arab and Muslim World to the General Accountability Office, and from the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution to the Defense Science Board Task Force on Strategic Communications, there has been a noticeable void in critical analysis of the validity of the State Department’s strategy to win the war of ideas. This is both surprising and troubling, given the weak polling data previously mentioned.

First, the State Department’s popularity strategy may have made perfect sense immediately following 9/11. But since America’s military invasion of Iraq, which opened up another front in the war on terror, it is conceivable the strategy has exacerbated the problem it sought to address, diminishing both the message and U.S. credibility in lieu of Operation Iraqi Freedom, and therefore increasing the already negative perceptions about America among Muslims. As the Brookings Institution underscores: “...rather than being viewed as a victim of terrorism, the United States has become widely perceived as arrogant and anti-Muslim. Perhaps most illustrative is that what the United States calls a ‘war on terrorism’ is broadly interpreted as a ‘war on Islam’ by the world’s Muslims.”⁴⁷ The reality today is that America is seen as the aggressor, having invaded Iraq without just recourse to war in the eyes of the Muslim critical masses. The Brookings Institution explains that “Just as Americans cannot forget our own traumatic experience of the September 11th terrorist attacks, so to the citizens of many predominantly Muslim countries cannot escape their own perceived experience

with America, American weapons, and American policy.”⁴⁸ Yet, it goes on to suggest that “...treating the citizens of the Islamic world as if they were legitimate stakeholders in U.S. policy can be a cornerstone to a more successful U.S. public diplomacy strategy...”⁴⁹ This points to and reinforce the specious notion that America is the problem, which begs to question: If the messenger is to blame, is it realistic to expect its message will be well-received by and effective toward an audience prone to conspiracy theories and contempt for America? Shibley Telhami, a member of President Bush's advisory group on public diplomacy, observed on 12 September 2004 that “today Arab and Muslim attitudes toward the U.S. and the degree of distrust of the U.S. are far worse than they were three years ago...There is a total collapse of trust in American intentions and it's only gotten far worse over the past year.”⁵⁰ He poses an important question: “When people hate or resent the United States far more than they dislike bin Laden, how can you succeed?”⁵¹

Another concern has to do with the State Department's definition of the problem at hand. According to the Defense Science Board, “The U.S. Government does not even have a coherent statement of the problem, and refuses to address the importance of strategic communication in addressing it.”⁵² Is America the problem – the underlying cause of terrorism – as State's strategy suggests? Not according to Irshad Manji, and many other reform-minded Muslims like her. In her book, *The Trouble With Islam – A Muslim's Call for Reform in Her Faith*, Manji places blame on “the nasty side of the Koran, and how it informs terrorism.”⁵³ Regarding jihad, she notes the wiggle room for selective, terror-minded interpretations of the Koran, which reads: “We laid it down for the Israelites that whoever killed a human being, except as punishment for murder or

other villainy in the land, shall be regarded as having killed all mankind.”⁵⁴ The operative word for would-be terrorists is “except,” which Manji notes “can be deployed by militant Muslims to fuel their jihads.”⁵⁵ She then makes the linkage between the interpretation of this Koranic verse and jihad terror:

*Would the bootprints of American troops in Saudi soil qualify as ‘villainy in the land?’ To bin Laden, you bet. As for American civilians, can they be innocent of either ‘murder’ or ‘villainy’ when their tax money helps Israel buy tanks to raze Palestinian homes? A no-brainer for bin Laden. As he told CNN in 1997, ‘The U.S. government has committed acts that are extremely unjust, hideous, and criminal, through its support of the Israeli occupation of Palestine. Due to its subordination to the Jews, the arrogance of the United States has reached the point that they’ve occupied Arabia, the holiest place of the Muslims. For this and other acts of aggression and injustice, we have declared jihad against the United States.’*⁵⁶

She further examines this argument with an analysis of the homicide note that Mohamed Atta, leader of the 9/11 attacks, wrote on behalf of his terrorist gang. According to Atta’s words, “It is enough for us that [the Koran’s verses] are the words of the Creator of the Earth and the planets...Know that the gardens of paradise are waiting for you in all their beauty, and the women of paradise are waiting, calling out, ‘Come hither, friend of God.’”⁵⁷ If only Atta knew that what he interpreted from the Koran as “women of paradise” actually means “*white raisins*,” a pricey delicacy in seventh-century Arabia.⁵⁸ Such literal, rigid, and/or selective interpretations (or misinterpretations) of the Koran are not uncommon, and they are ultimately the source from which the likes of Al Qaeda are able to derive power and popular support.

So, how does improving American popularity among Muslims counter this

underlying problem? It does not. Such an indirect, tactical approach is defensive in nature, contradicting the warfighting axiom that the best defense is a good offense in which fights are best won when taken directly to the heart of the enemy's source of power and popular support. The strategy's passivity gives credence to the questionable proclamation that Islam is the victim, hijacked by a radical few, for which mainstream Muslim society writ large has no culpability. It buries President Bush's strategic idea that "The war on terrorism is not a clash of civilizations. It does, however, reveal the clash inside a civilization, a battle for the future of the Muslim world."⁵⁹ As Richard Holbrooke put it, America's war of ideas has failed on many levels: "the failure to open a sustained public discussion with key Muslim intellectuals over how the Koran has been twisted by extremists into an endorsement of murder, the failure to publicize the fact that hundreds of those killed in the World Trade Center were Muslims [and] the failure to find credible, Arabic-speaking Muslims to speak the truth about [Osama] bin Laden."⁶⁰

Thus, while the State Department's strategy might be noble and logical for the objective of fending off anti-Americanism, it is not suitable for attacking the underlying cause of terrorism.

Recommendations

Within the aforementioned context of the State Department's shortfalls in the war of ideas, recommendations to fix them assume that U.S. foreign policies remain static in the face of rising global anti-Americanism trends. This assumption is mostly relevant to the State Department's communications strategy, as its resource and organizational shortfalls ought to be viewed as necessary fixes regardless of how U.S. foreign policies evolve.

Resource Recommendations

With over 1 billion Muslims in the world and only 288 million reached by the State Department's *Shared Values* strategic communications campaign, the weak polling figures achieved should come as no surprise. This is very much a resource issue. As any Madison Avenue ad agency executive will testify, if a company does not invest a sufficient amount of resources on marketing communications relative to its competition, then it is essentially wasting what few resources it is spending. In a world cluttered with all sorts of messages coming from all variety of state- and non-state actors vying for the masses' attention, it takes an asymmetric marketing communications budget relative to the competition to rise above it all. For the war of ideas, it requires outspending the competition (i.e., Al Qaeda leadership, political Islamist Mullahs in mosques or madressas, and those who parrot them) on integrated communications campaigns marshaled across a full spectrum of media vehicles. It requires advertising/editorial space on commercial airwaves, in magazines and newspapers, and over print/Internet

vehicles; it requires idea placement in movies and other soft-sell cultural vehicles; and it requires public relations and/or word-of-mouth programs involving media interviews, public speeches, and events-based marketing.

However, since frequency data is not available to help quantify the media pressure and persistence that was actually applied against the target audience, it is exceedingly difficult to ascertain how much additional funding is required to better support the war of ideas. Furthermore, no official estimate exists on enemy propaganda expenditures. The author recommends commissioning a study to reconcile such unknowns, including research that can facilitate smarter geographic prioritization of resources. Such a study will help provide a more accurate assessment of resources needed – and where in the Muslim world those resources should be spent – to start winning the ideological struggle. Whatever the ‘competition’ is spending, the author recommends applying the Powell doctrine to this aspect of the war of ideas – overwhelm the enemy by significantly outspending them.

In the meantime, a number of resource proposals should be considered. For example, the Defense Science Board recommends current resources (personnel and funding) be tripled for the Department of State’s public diplomacy activities (e.g., information programs, educational and cultural exchanges, embassy activities, and opinion research).⁶¹ In January 2005, the Public Diplomacy Council recommended “an increase in public diplomacy overseas staffing by 300 percent over five years...[an expansion of] language and cultural awareness training to ensure public diplomacy officers [are] fluent in the local language at every overseas post; [and an increase in] program budgets for public diplomacy, including international broadcasting and

exchange programs, four-fold over five years.”⁶² Minow singles out international communications, recommending a six-fold budget increase from its current level, or one percent of the Defense Department’s proposed budget.⁶³ “As a point of reference,” notes a 2003 Independent Task Force of The Council on Foreign Relations, “just one percent of the Defense Department’s proposed budget of \$379 billion would be \$3 billion to \$4 billion. This pales in comparison to the \$222 billion American companies invest annually on overseas advertising.”⁶⁴

Winning the war of ideas is a far more complicated challenge than selling Big Macs and Coca-Colas to the world’s hungry, thirsty fast-food consumers – and possibly much more expensive. More money is a must for filling the manpower and share-of-voice gaps; but it is not the only answer.

Organizational Recommendations

On organization, General Dwight D. Eisenhower said, “The teams and staffs through which the modern commander absorbs information and exercises his authority must be a beautifully interlocked, smooth-working mechanism. Ideally, the whole should be practically a single mind.”⁶⁵ The U.S. military has established doctrine based on this time-tested principle of war known as *unity of command*. As Napoleon put it, “Nothing is so important in war as an undivided command.”⁶⁶ The same should go for the war of ideas. A consistent strategic idea seamlessly integrated across all variety of delivery methods demands it, and such doctrinal concepts should be institutionalized for the ideological struggle. Unity of command, according to the Joint Chiefs of Staff’s *Joint Publication 0-2 – Unified Action Armed Forces*, “means all forces operate under a single commander with the requisite authority to direct all forces employed in pursuit of a

common purpose. It is the foundation for trust, coordination, and teamwork necessary for unified action and requires clear delineation of responsibility among commanders up, down, and laterally.”⁶⁷ Starting at the top, the Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy for the Arab and Muslim World said that “strategic direction and accountability must begin with the White House...the President enforces discipline and makes certain that those who carry out both official and public diplomacy speak with one voice. There can be no success without the seriousness of purpose and interagency coordination provided at the direction of the President of the United States. Public diplomacy must have his stamp of approval, enthusiastic support, and long-term commitment.”⁶⁸

Below the President, a February 2005 *Washington Post* editorial by four former directors of the United States Information Agency endorses, as does the author, “A new proposal just put forward by the Public Diplomacy Council in Washington [which] holds much promise. The council, a private group that includes many experienced public diplomats, calls urgently for the creation of a U.S. Agency for Public Diplomacy, linked to the State Department but with an autonomous structure and budget.”⁶⁹ Indeed, such an agency would be akin to a rebirth of the USIA, though not in name. For nearly 50 years the USIA was a priority for presidents, from Harry S. Truman to George H.W. Bush; it was instrumental in the ideological struggle against communism and helped win the Cold War, but it was axed in 1999 – an unfortunate casualty of the “peace dividend.”⁷⁰

According to the Public Diplomacy Council, the proposed agency’s director would be equivalent in rank to the Deputy Secretary of State and report to the President through the Secretary of State; and he/she would be responsible for managing the government’s civilian informational and exchange functions, and coordinating all public

diplomacy efforts.⁷¹ While under the direction of the Secretary of State, the Council recommends placing the agency outside the confines of the State Department's bureaucracy, giving it an autonomy akin to the separation that exists between the FBI and the Department of Justice – “free of the incompatible State Department culture that has been ineffective, slow and reactive” in waging the war of ideas.⁷²

To facilitate centralized control (from Washington) and decentralized execution (at overseas field offices), the author recommends that the Council's proposed agency cue off a key military tenet of joint command and control doctrine: the tenet of “implicit communications,” which seeks to minimize restrictive control measures and detailed instructions for efficiency, effectiveness, cooperation, and compliance.⁷³ More specifically, the proposed agency should institutionalize two concepts of this tenet – *commander's intent* and *mission-type orders*:

*Commander's intent represents a unifying idea that allows decentralized execution within centralized, overarching guidance. It describes the commander's desired outcome, while allowing subordinates to exercise initiative in consonance with the commander's overall goals. During execution the situation may change, possibly making some assigned tasks obsolete, but the commander's intent is overarching and usually remains unchanged.*⁷⁴

*Mission-type orders direct a subordinate to perform a certain task without specifying how to accomplish it. The senior leaves the details of execution to the subordinate, allowing the freedom — and the obligation — to take whatever steps are necessary to deal with the changing situation. This freedom of action encourages the initiative needed to exploit [opportunities].*⁷⁵

— *Joint Publication 0-2: Unified Action Armed Forces, 10 July 2001*

For up-channel communications and Washington-level decision-making support,

the proposed agency should “not merely receive instructions from Washington headquarters to carry out specific programs but rather provide input into Washington decision making and be able to choose those programs most effective under local conditions.”⁷⁶ And for interagency unified action, there should be “consistent and continuing coordination from regular and significant levels of exchanges of personnel with the uniformed military and with other agencies, particularly in the areas of public affairs and civil affairs.”⁷⁷ Beyond organizing for strategic success, the State Department needs to communicate more strategically.

Strategy Recommendations

The U.S. government should create a “National Strategy for the War of Ideas,” perhaps subordinate to the *National Security Strategy* or the *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism*. This would guide future strategic communications and serve as a touchstone for the previously recommended *commander’s intent*. Policy makers involved in the preparation of this new national strategy will have much to consider.

For example, there is more to anti-Americanism than polls might indicate. The devil is in the details, or the complexity behind the numbers. As *The Economist* (19 February 2005) pointed out in a special report on anti-Americanism:

Most people's feelings about America are complicated. ‘America,’ after all, is shorthand for many other terms: the Bush administration, a Republican-dominated Congress, Hollywood, a source of investment, a place to go to study, a land of economic opportunity, a big regional power, the big world power, a particular policy, the memory of something once done by the United States, a set of political values based on freedom, democracy and economic liberalism, and so on. It is easy to be for some of these and against others, and some may wax or wane in importance

*according to time, circumstance, propaganda or wishful thinking. So it should be no surprise that some people can hold two apparently contradictory views of America at once.*⁷⁸

Addressing so many variables would overwhelm any prospective target audience with a scatterbrained list of messages, weighing down an already ineffectual strategy with information overload and impropriety. Instead, the Department would be wise to devise a new communications strategy that goes beyond American popularity. “For to win one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the acme of skill. To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill,” said Sun Tzu, the 4th Century BC Chinese philosopher and military strategist.⁷⁹ Satloff echoes this *Art of War* wisdom with a more strategic vision for the war of ideas, which the author endorses:

The key ingredient missing from most analyses of the ‘why do they hate us?’ problem is a recognition that ... two groups of Muslims – those whose hatred arises from “who we are” and those whose critique is based on ‘what we do’ – are also battling each other over the fate and direction of their societies...The fact that this battle rages in most countries without too many bombs going off or too many dead bodies piling up neither renders it any less momentous nor makes the imperative of victory any less urgent. The U.S. has a vital stake in the outcome of this battle, both for the sake of Muslims themselves and for the security of Americans and U.S. interests in Arab and Muslim countries. Without reservation or apology, America’s strategy should be to help non- and anti-Islamist Muslims beat back the Islamist challenge. This strategy must be pursued even if many of these putative Muslim allies express bitter dislike for certain aspects of U.S. foreign policy. In the post-September 11 era, public diplomacy should be focused on fighting the battle of ideas in Muslim societies. This is a battle that can be won, though it will take more time, money, commitment, and ingenuity than the U.S. government has so far been

*willing to dedicate to the task.*⁸⁰

In other words, the war of ideas is a *Muslim* war being waged within Islamic society between liberal, reform-minded Muslims on one end of the religious/ideological spectrum and, on the other end, radical Islamist Muslims who possess extremely rigid and/or selective interpretations of the Koran. Manji highlights the crux of the conflict, and in doing so she courageously risks the same fate as Dutch filmmaker, Theo van Gogh, who was murdered for similar outspokenness. She writes, “Far from being perfect, the Koran is so profoundly at war with itself that Muslims who ‘live by the book’ have no choice but to choose what to emphasize and what to downplay...reform isn’t about telling ordinary Muslims what not to think, but about giving Islam’s 1 billion devotees permission to think.”⁸¹ There are countless courageous dissenters like Manji. The State Department needs to find them and, where appropriate, lend a helping hand. Such Muslims are the base for reformation – the antidote to Al Qaeda – and the Department needs to find ways to quietly but effectively rally behind them. This will require new research.

The author recommends commissioning a panel of strategic communications experts to conduct an exhaustive study of the enemy’s propaganda strategy, the State Department’s post-9/11 communications strategy, and the growing Muslim debate on Islamic reformation. Conclusions from this study can serve as touchstones for developing a new strategy to better address the underlying source of terrorism and identify methods for supporting the Islamic reformers. The panel’s key deliverables should include the development and analysis of at least three alternative courses of action, any one of which could stand a reasonable chance of helping reform-minded Muslims triumph in their cause. For example, the author envisions an alternative course

of action which takes a two-pronged approach to the war of ideas. It concedes that while President Bush continues to evolve his national security doctrine against terrorism from one of preemptive/preventative attack to one that encourages democratization and liberalization of governments in the Muslim world, the State Department could parallel his efforts with overt strategic communications on the value of such change; simultaneously, the State Department could lead discrete, strategic programs that seek to encourage Islamic reformation, giving as much “ownership” as possible to Muslims for the strategy’s execution.

Whatever courses of action are considered, the issue of credibility must be factored into the decision making process. As Keith Reinhard, CEO of global advertising agency DDB Worldwide, told the 9/11 Commission during hearings in August 2004, “The United States Government is simply not a credible messenger.”⁸² Fortunately, the private sector is already addressing this concern, and Reinhard is among the vanguard. In January 2004, he and other influential advertising executives, as well as a few academics, incorporated “Business for Diplomatic Action” to find a business-oriented solution to America's image problems.⁸³ According to *The Economist* (26 February 2004), the group wants to “address three of the four main criticisms that it says foreigners have of America: the threat that global brands pose for local firms which lack equivalent marketing and managerial resources; the perception that America cares only about America; and the threat that American popular culture poses to local cultures and religions. (The fourth, foreign policy, is not something business can solve, says Mr Reinhard.)”⁸⁴ The State Department should applaud and encourage such initiatives – and learn from them, especially if it chooses to maintain its current strategy.

Ultimately, the proposed panel should submit its three courses of action to the President, along with a detailed analysis of each option so that the President can make an intelligent selection of the alternative deemed most likely to succeed. Anticipating the need for future flexibility, the author also recommends new measures of success, similarly approved by the President, which the new strategy can be reasonably expected to shape. Lastly, the author recommends periodically reconvening the panel to evaluate the new strategy's performance against these measures of success, enabling needed changes to be smartly acted upon.

CONCLUSION

Just as times have changed since the fall of the Berlin Wall, times have also dramatically changed since the fall of the World Trade Center. One thing that tragically links these two events is the fall of U.S. strategic communications. Whether this was due to “peace dividend” frugality or wishful thinking about some hypothetical *End of History*, the U.S. let its guard down to the possibility that a *Clash of Civilizations* (or, as President Bush more accurately described it, a clash within a civilization) could manifest itself in terror on American shores. Causal speculation aside, the U.S. is losing the war of ideas because it has largely abandoned this crucial front in the global war on terror. It is time to get back in the game and start winning.

Glossary

CEO	Chief Executive Officer
OGC	Office of Global Communications
NSC	National Security
PCC	Policy Coordinating Committee Council
USIA	United States Information Agency

Notes

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